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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: [review\\_editor@platypus1917.org](mailto:review_editor@platypus1917.org). All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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Bill Ayers continues on page 3

wreckage, engage in the activism, and find out who we the SDS? It was a group that said, we must dive into the like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). What was to terms with it struck us as fatal. So we created groups ganized Left at the time couldn't see it or couldn't come setting the terms and the agenda. The fact that the or- Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and others were Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and saying, "Ah, stupid, just a bunch of action freaks." mal mistake. You are looking at the Paris Commune who were young and ready to go, that was a kind of pri- ideology! Don't pay much attention to them." But to us, those guys are a bunch of action freaks. They have no the sit-ins and the Freedom Riders and said, "Ugh, rington, Irving Howe, and many Communists, looked at many people on the Old Left, including Michael Har- below, the Black Freedom Movement. It defined the then, Most compelling was the mass upheaval from into history. There were critical things going on just very privileged background, my comrades and I waded I was a young person first coming to politics out of a model that is very compelling to me, it is true that when set out to accomplish, but there is something in that story? No, there is not. It didn't accomplish everything it come out pure, good, and perfect? Is there one single rice, a society that tried very hard to face its past. Did it least we will have it out in the open. Look at South Af- will include lots of reconciling and contradictions. At swer but of engaging collectively in a quest, one that needed. It is not a question about getting the right an- BA: I think that's true. Political honesty about the past is generated a certain honesty about the past.

refashion the Left for our time until and unless we have today. You're suggesting that we are not really going to into the question of reconciling our Left in the world the truth and reconciliation about Vietnam is really tied and distortions. So, it seems to me that this question of events the New Left waded into history despite those lies left than with the liberal false in the legacy it inherited in You had perhaps more sympathy with the Communist according to plan a great deal had to be pugged or tied. order to claim that, so to speak, history was proceeding other hand the legacy of the Communist Party, which, in within its promise all that stood outside it and on the statist liberalism that claimed to be gradually including that you faced on the one hand a triumphalist welfare confront much that rang false in the legacy it inherited in your becoming politicized. Certainly, the New Left had to faced a somewhat comparable problem in the process of Left and to get at that by asking how your generation reeling condition occasionally by the deep crisis of the reason. I want to address history's seeming amemic and Left doesn't really engage history in our time. For this

SL: Part of what I read out of your discussion of the *déjà* feeling of the recent antiwar movement is that the forward in hopeful and deliberate and positive ways. gize the struggles. This weakens our capacity to move know how to face that, we lie to ourselves and mytholo- has never gone away. Since we don't want and don't has transformed itself. White supremacy continues. It We can't see the ways in which the racial nightmare second thoughts. It is an insanity, but a collective insan- Luther King breakfast without suffering indignation or why people like Dick Cheney can sit down to the Martin and we are all so much the better for it. It's a lie. It is Luther King had a dream, that dream has been realized, Obama stands at the end of the Selma Bridge. Martin narrative is. "We won't." Now everything is post-racial: thing for the Black Freedom Movement. The dominant hearts and open minds. Frankly, you can say the same us because we've never collectively faced it with open ward, it casts no dark and murky shadow. But it does for a reference point for them moving forward and back- they don't need to worry about it so much. It's no longer are all done with their American war. It's ancient history; that, if you go to Vietnam, it doesn't haunt them. They never tried, Vietnam haunts us. What's fascinating is what they failed to do, and where that leaves us today. I in fact, John McCain is a war criminal. Yet nobody in the McCain could run for President as a Vietnam War hero: indication that we have never done that is that John ask: What is true about that experience? One obvious to look into the Vietnam War and the opposition to it and uncontested or untrobbled endpoint. Still, we have yet committee, and I don't mean that we could reach an truth and reconciliation process. I don't mean some write about this in *Public Enemy*. There has never been a what they failed to do, and where that leaves us today. I in both cases, we have not come to terms with the issues unfolding and being contested in that period and, the Black Liberation Struggle. These are two critical haunt our culture from the 60s are the Vietnam War and generally, I would say that the large matters that still everybody knew what to do. That is far from true. More The one thing not to learn is that it was perfect and that learn from the experiences of, say, the 1968 upheaval. BA: I think that there are things to discuss and things to way that allows history to be transformed.

SL: Certainly, the last thing we need to do is to divide ourselves in those terms. But I am interested in the possible transmission of historical experience in such a not done. And so I choose to be of this generation. I am

aren't we sharing the planet right now? I think it does canes, everyone of us will be dead in 100 years. And street today from babies in carriages to old people with thing I think of as I get older, but everyone I saw in the ably at the world we are living in. This is perhaps some- and all around me 50 years ago. I still look uncomfort- a great humanizing enterprise—that flared up inside ments—peace, racial and economic justice, education as the same passions and focused on the same commit- eration of the 60s. I am attuned to the present, ignited by of struggle. I don't believe that my generation is the gen- That said, I don't buy the generational way of talking tinuous line with today. That's one thing.

Left, we have to put the 60s in perspective and into a con- that is not real. If you want to get real about building a tee of righteousness and ecstasy? It's all marketing and generation." As if coming of age in the 60s was a quaran- or doing a book reading, "Gosh, I was born in the wrong ber of times people have said to me when I am speaking of the inadequacy of the present. I can't tell you the num- sex." This ideology is poured into people to instill a sense engaged in, they had the greatest music and the best was on the agenda, it was righteous struggle everyone perfect, everyone agreed to oppose the war, racial justice steady diet of, "In the 1960s the demonstrations were So, this mythmaking is crazy. Young people are fed a 1978? Now? I remember a *Newsweek* story in 1968 that When did it actually start? 1954, 1966? When did it end? So we have to be careful about this idea of "the 60s." later, the struggles of the returning Black GIs and so on. Movement without the struggles within the military and, War II period. There wouldn't have been a Civil Rights that the 1960s is really a continuation of the post-World If you look at any cut of the last hundred years, you see does that now.

BA: There is a great deal of mythologizing of the 1960s, Nobody I know lives by decades. Nobody looked at a clock or a watch on December 31st, 1969, and said, "Oh but for me "the sixties" is so much myth and symbol. us about the crisis we face?

in the 1980s and 1990s? What, if anything, does this tell

stannily look back to the 60s just as did those politicized some level. So, why does this generation have to con- reckoning with the Old Left. You came to terms with it at for your generation, and ultimately the New Left had its Old Left, the thirties, formed an immediate background haps the 30a didn't linger for you. The heroic days of the the memory of the 60s lingers now in a way that per- SL: One of the things I was trying to get at is the way One of the things I was trying to get at is the way that is what I mean about *déjà vu*.

the next war. That is what I mean about *déjà vu*. ing, we are never without war. We are a warlike, highly For people who like to think of themselves as peace lov- "Here we go again!" where the issue of war, invasion, and relates to the notion of permanent war, the experience of Bill Ayers: One reason I wrote "*Déjà vu* all over again"

the Left in the present? it, become an obstacle to the possible reconstitution of the legacy of the 1960s, its "mythologization" as you put 60s *déjà vu* you speak of in the "Afterword"? How has what about the post-9/11 period seemed to provoke the inhabit seems quite distant from 2008. Looking back, The post-re-election, post-Occupy moment we now the 1960s is now a brake on progressive struggles." go on to say that, "in some ways the mythologizing of you comment simply, "*Déjà vu* all over again." You then saying is give peace a chance." All we are And on the radio John and Yoko implore us: "All we are accompanying slogan: BACK BY POPULAR DEMAND. sign – all tie-dyed and psychedelic, so 60s – with an just saw a bumper sticker with a large colorful peace installment of your memoir *Fugitive Days*, you write, "I

Spencer Leonard: In the 2008 "Afterword" to the first clock or a watch on December 31st, 1969, and said, "Oh Nobody I know lives by decades. Nobody looked at a but for me "the sixties" is so much myth and symbol. BA: There is a great deal of mythologizing of the 1960s, is an edited transcript of their conversation.

former member of Students for a Democratic Society and the Weather Underground and author of the memoirs *Fugitive Days* (2001) and *Public Enemy* (2013). What follows

Spencer A. Leonard

# A new world racing towards us An interview with Bill Ayers

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### 1 A new world racing towards us An interview with Bill Ayers

Spencer A. Leonard

### 2 Gender and the new man Emancipation and the Russian Revolution

Bini Adamczak

### www: The politics of work

Robert Pollin, Stanley Aronowitz, and Jason Wright



62

[www.platypus1917.org](http://www.platypus1917.org)







# Gender and the new man

## Emancipation and the Russian Revolution

Bini Adamczak

IN 1968 THE SOCIALIST GERMAN STUDENT LEAGUE (SDS) of Stuttgart printed a poster that said: “Everyone talks about the weather. Not us.” This slogan was originally used by Deutsche Bahn, the national railway. Instead of the depiction of an electric locomotive of the original poster, the SDS printed portraits of Marx, Engels, and Lenin below the caption. This alone should have raised some concern. To this day, Deutsche Bahn is incapable of not talking about the weather, which so often disrupts their stereotypically German concern with strict punctuality. A leftist student group at the University of Frankfurt was therefore probably on to something when in 2002 it changed the slogan to: “Everyone talks about the weather. We’re doing something about it.” The text was illustrated with a blueprint for a utopian weather machine. Thus temperature, cloudiness, and precipitation do play a certain role in politics and its history; politics is not only all about shabby clothes but also about bad weather. This is true for revolutions, too. In his memoir *Defying Hitler*, the conservative anti-fascist Sebastian Haffner wrote about the German Revolution of 1918: “That the Great War broke out when the sun shone gloriously over Germany and the revolution in the fog of a cold and wet November day was a tremendous handicap for the latter”—and indeed it failed. Haffner noted: “The fate of the revolution seemed sealed when the workers and sailors dispersed after a successful street battle on December 24 to go home and celebrate Christmas Eve.”<sup>1</sup> The climate proved more advantageous to the Russian Revolution, on the other hand, which had begun in February of 1917. As historian Orlando Figes suspects, it probably erupted because so many people were on the streets enjoying the beautiful weather. After all it seemed like spring when the temperature in Petrograd had risen to 23° F.<sup>2</sup>

### Misunderstandings

The sunny day on which the Russian Revolution began was February 23, 1917, or March 8 after the Western calendar—International Women’s Day. While Women’s Day had been previously celebrated on different days, four years after the revolution began March 8 was determined as its definite date. Though the reason has since been obscured, the date was selected because of the event of the Russian Revolution. After all, it was members of the group of people to whose gender this day is dedicated who first demonstrated for equality, then struck for bread, only to finally march to the city’s center chanting “Down with the Tsar.” They wore pants, short hair, and often guns. A few days and confrontations later, the Tsar abdicated. A few weeks later the news had reached the villages, where the majority of Russians lived at the time. At first waiting peasants streamed to the churches, unsure of what would become of them with their beloved Tsar—nothing less than a human god—gone. Shortly afterward, when local authorities and the regional police had lost their power too, the same peasants thanked god for their peoples’ triumph and prayed for the new government. Then they seized church land, disposed of the priests, and refused to continue paying for church service.

Not only in the villages but across the country reactions to the revolution varied extremely. Some Russians thought it to be a “national rising” against the Tsar’s court, which had been suspected for some time to actually be dominated by the Germans; others greeted each other with a slight variation on the Easter greeting, “Russia is risen!” Some were even of firm belief that lying, gambling, theft, cursing, and above all drunkenness had been overcome at once. These misunderstandings cannot be overcome nor can they be put into a temporal or factional order; not only do the same people want different things at different times, but different people want different things at the same time, and the same people want different things at the same time. Next to other complications, a revolution consists of an ensemble of varied misunderstandings, only to be surpassed by the one true misunderstanding—that all

understand one another. On the realization of their freedom the peasants put on their best clothes, kissed, and celebrated for three days straight.

After all the revolution is, among other things, the experience of mutual understanding, and at the same time a misunderstanding multiplied a million fold. The provisional government in Petrograd, which had attempted to govern Russia between February and October 1917, intended to let the Constituent Assembly make a decision about what was possibly the most important question of the revolution—land distribution. It was for this reason that the government prepared the first general elections. Until then, so the government said to the impatient peasants, it would consider the expropriation of the nobility’s land to be against the law. Driven by its thirst to learn how to practice democracy, the peasantry looked past the government’s hesitation and passed laws of its own legitimizing these expropriations. While bourgeois officers meant the entire nation when they spoke of “the people,” the peasants, on the other hand, did not see the officers as part of the people. They therefore wouldn’t understand it as contradictory to the peoples’ democracy to threaten to kill the gentlemen officers if they were to order a march. Similar misunderstandings also haunted the thought of the communists. A high-ranking officer, General Brusilov, described the “foxhole-Bolshevism” of common soldiers thus: “All they wanted was this: Peace to go home, rob the landholders and to live free, without paying taxes or accepting any authority. They neither understood who the parties involved were, nor did they understand anything about communism or the division into workers and peasants. Yet they dreamed of living without law or landholders. It was this anarchist freedom they termed Bolshevism.”<sup>3</sup>

Many soldiers seemed to believe that annexations, of which the slogan, “Peace without annexations” spoke, meant appropriations of land in the Balkans; some even mistook the International for yet another divinity. In the early twenties Henry Ford, the anti-Semitic and anti-communist industrialist, gained a similar reputation in Russia after the “socialist” rationalization and Taylorization of the productive process: many people thought of Ford as a god backing Lenin and Trotsky’s actions. Despite the arrogance of conservative historians and the aristocrats they represented, they were indeed right: The term “the people,” understood in a national sense, had always hardly been revolutionary, not to mention emancipatory. And Ford was indeed an idol of the Bolshevik fetishization of the productive apparatus. Most of all, gaining land by “wild” expropriations and peace by desertions did constitute the quintessence of the revolution of 1917, to which Bolshevism lent its political name during a brief historical moment. Yet it is less important to correct the misunderstanding in hindsight by taking sides and by bringing order into the chaos; rather, it is key to comprehend that this misunderstanding can, in fact, not be corrected. Or it may, but only at the cost of the revolution.

It is thus that we can understand the Bolshevik model of politics: namely, as an attempt to mute the polyphony of the revolution. After having barely called for all power to the Soviets, they outlawed all bourgeois parties, then the social-democratic ones, and finally the social revolutionary and anarchist ones. After this, the Bolsheviks suppressed all opposition within the party and prohibited all differing opinions. This effort to bring the entire polyphony of the revolution into line was revealed by Lenin already in 1918: “Large-scale machine industry . . . calls for absolute and strict unity of will . . . But how can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one . . . The revolution has only just smashed the oldest, strongest and heaviest of fetters, to which the people submitted under duress. *That was yesterday. Today*, however, the same revolution demands—precisely in the interests of its development and consolidation, precisely in the interests of socialism—that the people *unquestioningly obey the single will* of the leaders of labour.”<sup>4</sup>



International Working Women’s Day strike sparked the Russian Revolution on March 8, 1917. Banner reads: “Elections are a woman’s right.” Clara Zetkin at the second International Conference of Women Socialists in 1910 in Copenhagen suggested that March 8 become International Working Women’s Day; it was intended as a day to mobilize working women against capitalism.

Karl Kautsky, Lenin’s former teacher, theorized that the position of the workers would be pressed below their level under capitalism. He was probably not the only one who must have felt misunderstood; the revolutionary Victor Serge, on his arrival in Russia in 1918, heard similar declarations by Grigori Zinoviev, leader of the Petrograd Soviet, and discovered in them a “theory of the suppression of all freedom.”<sup>5</sup> Most of all, all the workers who had risen against the authorities with the demand for “workers’ control” must have felt seriously fooled by such an outbreak of authoritarianism.

All kinds of affects blended during the revolution: hatred for all authority, a desire for freedom as well as for vengeance, and many more. The peasants arrested their priests, domestic servants moved into the biggest rooms of their masters’ mansions while banishing the latter into tiny chambers, so-called women shaved their heads and demanded equal pay, waiters demonstrated against tipping, sex-workers struck, and soldiers called for the eight-hour day at the front in solidarity with the striking workers; at the same time, nobles were raped, thieves lynched, and those looking foreign or rich beat up. It’s this that characterizes the event of revolution, and not the appointment of a provisional government—February—or its removal—October. Yet expropriations of big estates, which had been happening for months as “wild” expropriations, increased after a social revolutionary became minister of agriculture, and increased more so after the Bolshevik government had “legalized” them. The memory of the brutal vengeance the tsarist regime had taken out on the peasants after the attempted revolution of 1905 was still present. Hence they knew how difficult it would be to defend local revolutions against an organized counterrevolution. As it is desirable to leave the center of power empty in the first steps of revolution, precautions would need to be taken to ensure that this power would not be seized by anyone else. But a vacuum tends to collect all kinds of dirt. Too many revolutions (from France in 1848 to Spain in 1936 to Egypt in 2011) should be a warning to us not to underestimate the importance of continuing the struggle for and against state power. The molecular social processes and the larger event remain interdependent. This is so irrespective of the theater of representation—the abdication of the tsar, the storming of the Winter Palace—within both the propaganda spread by the revolutionary government as well as among hegemonic histories of the Russian Revolution, which had overshadowed those smaller social processes.

Yet even this great event, the seizure of state power—which is so often reduced to its historico-logical term—remains haunted by uncertainty, in spite of the precise military organization that it originally required. On the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, Eisenstein memorably depicted it in his movie *October* as the collective rising of the masses. However a more nuanced view reveals to us that, in fact, it was more of a coup brought about by conspiracy and aided by a series of mishaps and misunderstandings. Lenin had ordered it, despite his party’s resistance, for October 25 at noon.<sup>6</sup> For that was when the collective soviet was to be in session, and it would have likely put into practice the old call for “all power to the soviets,” including the removal of the provisional government. But the conquest of the Winter Palace, which was intended to preempt the soviets and secure strategic advantage for the Bolsheviks, had to be postponed several times; at first to three in the afternoon, then to six, until no fixed time was ordered anymore. At the deciding moment, the revolutionaries realized that the red lamp that was supposed to give the signal to begin the assault was missing. The commissar that had been ordered to fetch the lamp had got lost in the darkness. When he returned, he brought a lamp that could neither be attached to the flag pole nor did it turn out to be red in the first place. Finally, Lenin, not wanting to let the opportunity for his party’s dictatorship pass, simply claimed the government had been overthrown, while nothing of the sort had occurred. Later that night, when the Mensheviks and the right social revolutionaries had left the council of soviets in protest against the violent removal of the provisional government, the assault on the Winter Palace was still not over. Barely had the ministers been arrested, however, when the Bolshevik workers discovered the enormous wine cellar. Upon this discovery they initiated a binge that no discipline could stop. Even the commissars, who had been ordered to protect this treasure, got drunk. After the wine was poured into the streets, workers sucked it out of curbstones. Hence, in hindsight this glorious conquest of the Winter Palace could appear as yet another big misunderstanding—namely, as the conquest of a poorly protected wine cellar.

### Necessities

In this context it is arguable that the most misunderstood theoretician of revolution, next to Marx, was probably Alexandra Kollontai. That is to say that her polemics against repressive sexual morals were interpreted in all kinds of ways. A case in point was the demand for free love, which, after all, was a demand for freedom

from economic necessity, patriarchal violence, and intrusions by the clergy and by the state—the welfare office in Saratov interpreted these calls by publishing a “decree for the nationalization of women,” abolishing marriage and awarding so-called men the right to visit authorized brothels. In the town of Vladimir the “Bureau of Free Love” released a proclamation calling on all unmarried women between 18 and 50 to register so that it could select appropriate sexual partners for them.<sup>7</sup> Kollontai wanted to keep the state out of its subjects’ sex lives, and yet so-called men should receive the right to pick partners for procreation among those registered—all in the interest of the state. At the same time, the Marxist Kollontai, supposedly having replaced class struggle with the struggle of the sexes, was accused by a comrade from the communist women’s organization Zenotel of being a “communist polluted with a solid dose of feminist garbage.”<sup>8</sup> When in 1926 members of the communist youth organization Komsomol participated in a gang rape, this was explained by influences they had been set under by Kollontai’s theory of sexual liberation. The influential pedagogue and theoretician of sublimation Aron Zalkind had previously attacked Kollontai in his “Twelve Sexual Commandments.” Kollontai, Zalkind argued, had withheld some important information: namely that the female protagonist of her famous novella *Loves of Three Generations*, who had demanded equal sexual rights that were usually reserved for so-called boys, was indeed suffering from satyriasis, the male equivalent to nymphomania.<sup>9</sup> These soviet ideologues regarded permissive and active sexuality as an unhealthy waste of energy; especially thought of as an un-communist distraction from labor. Lenin may have added to this “anti-Kollontai” frenzy. In an interview with the German social democrat Clara Zetkin, he made a noteworthy comment on the “glass of water” theory, which is ascribed to Alexandra Kollontai. Lenin claimed that “this glass of water theory has made our young people mad, quite mad.” It stated that sexuality was just as much a basic need as was hunger or thirst, and that it could be satisfied without further romantic complications. Lenin responded: “Of course, thirst must be satisfied. But will the normal person in normal circumstances lie down in the gutter and drink out of a puddle, or out of a glass with a rim greasy from many lips? . . . But in love two lives are concerned, and a third, a new life, arises, it is that which gives it its social interest, which gives rise to a duty towards the community.”<sup>10</sup> In this tracing back of sexuality to the reproduction of the species and its definition as a social duty Lenin concurred with his feminist adversaries, including the biopolitical and eugenic implications of such beliefs. By picturing non-monogamous or uninhibited sexuality as a glass whose edge was greasy with the traces of many lips, Lenin thus not only referenced the hygiene discourse that was popular in the early Soviet Union; much more so, he referenced the classic heterosexist figure of thought that linked (and still links) free female sexuality to the loss of a certain “honor” or “purity,” and thus to the loss of a respectable attractiveness.

Lenin had already revealed his understanding of sexual domination and liberation in *The State and Revolution*—his last text written before the revolution—which was, at the same time, his most critical of the state:

Only communism makes the state absolutely unnecessary, for there is nobody to be suppressed—“nobody” in the sense of a class, of a systematic struggle against a definite section of the population. We are not utopians, and do not in the least deny the possibility and inevitability of excesses on the part of *individual persons*, or the need to stop such excesses. In the first place, however, no special machine, no special apparatus of suppression, is needed for this: this will be done by the armed people themselves, as simply and as readily as any crowd of civilized people, even in modern society, interferes to put a stop to a scuffle or to prevent a woman from being assaulted.<sup>11</sup>

Communism, Lenin thus argued unintentionally, would be just as free of the state as capitalism is free of sexist violence. With this prognosis he came very close to the hardly-utopian truth of actually existing socialism, more so than with his more optimistic predictions. The rejection of utopia—a term only used pejoratively in Lenin’s discourse of “scientific Marxism”—occurred in two ways: On the one hand, a paradisiacal imago of communism is undermined by the claim that some violence was “inevitable” as was the necessity of its suppression. On the other hand, the possibility of this suppression is realized in the present society, which thus contains moments of the future one. But the hardly-innocent example of the ‘woman requiring protection by men’ points to the premise of the argument of a violence exerted by the few, as if it occurred without preconditions. The assumption that a specific group of people would



*Rabotnitsa* editorial board in 1917. Clockwise from top left: Nikolaeva, Kudelli, Samoilova, Bonch-Bruevich, Kollontai and Elizarova.

“Gender and the new man” continues on page 4